

4 - My Personal Perspective

By Carol (Vander Meer) Jackson

My personal perspective on Article 5 in the Family Roots Folder:

5 - First Reformed Church of Wichert

The article is long and detailed, so I identified segments, listed below, that include references to members of our Romein/DeMik family. Spelling errors, grammatical inaccuracies, and omissions remain as they appeared in the original article on the church's website.

1. Segments highlighted in yellow on pages 3, 4, 5, and 7 include the names of family members involved in specific church activities. Family names located within the highlighted segments are italicized.
2. One of the names highlighted is my mother, Clara (Romein) Vander Meer, who served thirty years as a full-time organist for Sunday morning services. All our family members faithfully and actively participated at Sunday services and in activities conducted throughout the week.
3. Reference is made to Harry Romein and his brothers and sister singing in quartets and double quartets. I recall hearing family stories that Harry and his three brothers sang as a foursome as well.
4. One segment in the article, located on page 11, is highlighted in gray to identify an especially difficult period in the life of the church. This segment reads as follows: *During Rev. Van Roekel's [Rev. James Van Roekel] ministry there was an urgent need for more worship space. The church building was too small for the growing congregation. Often chairs were set up in the aisles during worship service. Sunday School classes were held in hallways, the parsonage basement, and even in the parsonage garage when the weather was warm. Much time was spent on deciding how to enlarge the church to answer the need of more space. When the Simon Hoekstra family donated a site for erecting a new church building about a mile west, the majority of the members sanctioned this alternative.*

For those of us who were there to witness the events that transpired during this period of time, the seemingly innocuous paragraph is a colossal understatement that literally bursts apart with sad and disheartening memories. I was a teenager, but I believe my perspective of what happened was the same as the adults, most of whom had been members their entire lives. My version of the events is summarized in the paragraphs on the following page.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's, the church's physical structure was showing its age. As a result of normal long-term wear and tear, the building had begun to deteriorate as spider-cracks developed in the ceiling and the walls became grime-dulled. Most importantly, the number of people attending the church was increasing and more space was needed in the sanctuary and meeting rooms.

Everyone agreed something needed to be done. A few families decided they wanted to build a new church similar to *city* churches because they believed the Wichert church was too *rural*. Most of the rest of the congregation, however, felt it would be more prudent to spend their money renovating the existing church and building an addition to accommodate church growth.

Rev. James Van Roekel, pastor at the time, was caught up in what became a devastatingly divisive battle between members of the church who wanted to build a new facility and those who wanted to refurbish the existing facility. The original families who wanted a new facility unabashedly manipulated the pastor and several members of the consistory to see things their way. Rev. Van Roekel preached sermons from the pulpit aimed at those who did not support the building of a new church. He even resorted to denouncing them for not following God's will for the church. I vividly recall my parents at Sunday dinner following morning services, talking in subdued voices, questioning why they could not go to church and simply hear a sermon based on the Word of God, not on the reasons why they were not following God's will. The consistory held one congregational vote after another, each time *discarding* the results until finally, a majority of the members gave in and voted to construct a new facility.

The fallout from the events described above was swift and tumultuous. The pastor and consistory were censured on thirteen counts by the Classis of Illiana because of how they mishandled the situation. In addition, a number of families became so embittered following months of dissension and controversy they left the Wichert congregation to establish the Faith Reformed Church in nearby Kankakee. *No one* in the Romein/DeMik families left the Wichert church during this period.

As far as I am concerned, perhaps the most regrettable fallout affected those of us who were young at the time and who became disillusioned with church in general. Thankfully, the church that spawned our disenchantment was the same church where we learned about God's love and grace and forgiveness. As with most wounds, it took time, but the wounds healed.